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## Diaries, Observations and FL Teachers' Creativity

This paper is the product of long studies on the specific character of FL teachers' work. It comprises the latest achievements of language teaching methodology. The author considers it to be especially important since her intention is to combine such procedures as diary writing and lesson observations into one model that concentrates on FL teachers' creativity. The first level of this model is designed for student teachers. Later, participant observations and self observations are expected to contribute to the development of FL teacher's autonomy. Autonomous teachers will most probably produce autonomous learners.

### 1. Introduction

A lot has been said and written about language teachers functioning as reflective practitioners. It is not strongly emphasized enough however that reflective procedures, by their very nature, are undoubtedly integral to teachers' creative approach to the teaching process itself. Creative individuals are perceived to be field independent and reflective rather than impulsive (cf. NEČKA 2001: 125). Language teachers who work on their creativity will then be able to perceive the characteristic features of the teaching process performed by themselves or other teachers and to change or improve its quality if necessary.

The creative work of reflective practitioners must also be seen in terms of looking for optimal solutions. Individual learners and groups of learners exhibit specific features and it is their teacher's task to establish the combination of unique procedures that will appear most suitable for particular cases. Thus it seems obvious that looking for the best forms of teaching for each group of learners is the teacher's creative work, a task that is never completed.

In addition, these patterns of unique, optimal solutions must agree with individual teaching styles. The concept of teaching style and the process of its creative development has been a matter for separate discussion (cf. WYSOCKA 2003: 29—42, see also WAJDA 2009: 71—80).

The specific character of reflective foreign language teachers' creativity requires therefore special attention. The aim of this chapter is to show practical ways to develop it, as well as to suggest moments when the application of particular creative procedures could be most successful. Taking into consideration the whole process of teacher education, including students' teaching practice, a three-level model of creative teaching development is offered here. It starts with diary writing which begins the whole process, preferably as early as during the period of student teaching practice. It is postulated that the first and easiest stage of the whole cycle, i.e. level one, has to be introduced as early as possible. The time of school practice seems to be most suitable for this purpose. The second step, designed for in-service teachers, includes participant observations, during which the teachers will have to employ their creative thinking while observing and modifying their students' reactions to the teaching procedures applied. The final level requires the teachers' most sophisticated abilities in respect of self-observations. The teachers' creativity will be directed here to the introduction of changes in their own behaviour, thus contributing to the development of their individual teaching styles. All the three levels of this model will be presented and discussed in detail below.

## 2. Diary writing and teachers' creativity

Diaries, not journals, have been chosen for level one of this model, since this is the tool the use of which best develops creativity in student teachers and novice teachers. It is assumed here, after WALLACE (1998: 62) that

diaries are essentially private documents and there are essentially no <rules> about how to keep a diary. Since the diary is private, diary-writers can confide to it whatever thoughts or feelings occur to them. It is therefore especially suitable for exploring affective data [...] Journals have many of the attributes of diaries, but the main difference is that they have been written to be read as public documents.

It is quite obvious, then, that only private notes, which take the form of a diary, can guarantee the author the feeling of safety and freedom of expression. This freedom is of particular importance here, since these diaries are recommended to be kept by student teachers. According to KULIŃSKA (2009: 50):

the first stage of the school practice is the observation of lessons run by other teachers. Due to these observations the student teacher may see how teachers organize their lessons, how they deal with their learners, how they motivate them to work, what their reactions in difficult situations are, and so

on. So, the student teacher has the possibility to see what he/she had heard about during FL methodology lectures.<sup>1</sup>

It is in school practice, that for the first time in their lives student teachers are confronted with school as an institution and with real school teaching.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is the first and most crucial moment to encourage them to start developing their creative abilities by keeping special private diaries. This moment should not be missed.

The basic principle of diary writing here is that their authors are expected to formulate their own suggestions concerning the teaching-learning process. These diaries would have to be written preferably over the whole period of student teaching practice and they could be prepared according to the following scheme (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Level one. The scheme of diary writing

About the lesson	Description of teaching procedures applied	Suggested changes/improvements

The first column must contain general information about the lesson that is being visited by the author of the diary, so that s/he knows what to refer to later. The necessary data would then include: the topic of the lesson, information about the learners, i.e., their age and level, language material taught, and all the other information about the lesson that the diary author considers essential. The second column is devoted to the description (not evaluation) of the teaching procedures selected earlier by the author of the diary to be the object of his/her particular attention. The third column is most important for the development of student teacher creativity. There, the student teachers are expected to place their own ideas and suggestions concerning the procedures that could be applied, different from the ones that they had seen. More critical individuals could even suggest the solutions which they would consider more successful in the given situation. Thus, the description of what the diary writer has seen will be completed with his/her ideas about possible changes for better. The diary is seen here as “an instrument for verbalizing and structuring teacher’s thoughts, which allows for a more conscious exploration of one’s own thinking about teaching and learning processes” (cf. GABRYŚ-BARKER 2009: 421).

The student teachers will be able to classify their diary tables from different points of view (e.g. types of lessons, or kinds of their suggestions) and they will have the opportunity to see how their ideas function in practice later, when they

<sup>1</sup> All the translations from Polish sources have been done by the author of the present paper.

<sup>2</sup> Here, during their school practice, students are officially guided by their mentors. I do not take into consideration cases when students-undergraduates start working at schools prior to obtaining their diplomas.

start to work as fully educated in-service teachers. The procedure described here must start as early as possible, that is, during the period of teacher education. It is the first opportunity for student teachers to develop their creative thinking. It is also the first stimulus that forms the grounds on which the habit of such thinking may be established in the future teaching practice of diary authors.

### **3. Observations and teachers' creativity**

Observations are included in the second and third level of the model presented here. They entail more advanced and challenging types of activities developing FL teachers' creativity within the frame of the present model. Keeping a diary, which is a procedure recommended for level one (see point 2.), may be also considered an initial component of FL teachers' professional competence development, which, according to ПОТОЧКА (2009: 61) starts during the period of student teaching practice. Moreover, diary writing forms a good background for teachers' further work on their creativity which will be carried out by means of participant observations and self-observations designed respectively for the second and third level of the model described here.

These two ways of carrying out observations will require the acquisition of unique abilities by particular individuals. Therefore the teachers will have to be equipped with special knowledge and skills before they begin their observations. Procedures that should be undertaken for this purpose will be described and discussed below.

#### **3.1. Background knowledge and skills**

The first problem to be solved by the teachers who have decided to work on their creativity by means of observations is connected with the need to collect basic knowledge about themselves, on the basis of which they would go on to the second level of the model presented here. This problem can be approached by the teachers in practice by their attempting to supply answers to the questions in respect of the characteristic features of their teaching styles. Examples of such questions are supplied below:

- What were the teacher's beliefs with which they started teaching?
- How did these beliefs change?
- What is the teachers' experience in planning language courses?
- What are the ways in which teachers prepare particular types of FL lessons?
- What are teachers' assumptions prior to particular lessons?
- What are the teachers' roles in which they feel best?
- What are the teachers' roles in which they feel worst?

- What are the characteristic ways of teachers' introducing, practicing and testing language material?
- What is the teachers' experience in constructing and evaluating language tests?
- What are the things about which the teachers feel (un)successful?
- What are the reasons of these feelings?

The answers to these questions do not cover all possible problems but they may serve as stimuli for particular individuals who will be able to add more details to their own characteristics, which will also contribute to the development of their creativity. Only equipped with the necessary knowledge about themselves can teachers start the conscious process of preparation for participant observation and self-observation. Their purposes determine the type of observation that is recommended here, i.e., event sampling (cf. KOMOROWSKA 2002: 16). The observers must then first of all carefully select the fragment of the lesson which will be the object of their interest.

The next ability that the teachers who are going to work within the frames of our creativity developing model will have to acquire is one of constructing and filling the observation sheet, i.e., the document in which the course of the observation is going to be registered. Each participant observation and each self-observation will be of unique character: planned, organized and registered only by one teacher — its author. Therefore it is recommended that particular teachers should be able to construct their observation sheets by themselves, taking into consideration the aim of the activities they are going to undertake.

According to KOMOROWSKA (2007: 255):

Each time the teacher must control the value of teaching strategies and techniques that they have read about or worked out themselves. They must realize what the advantages and disadvantages of their application are as well as what future consequences are going to be like.

These are also the reasons why FL teachers' creative abilities must be taken care of. In order to make the process of their development successful, it must be teacher-friendly. The model presented here assumes maximum flexibility. While it is only the first level that must last as long as the teaching practice of the students, who work under the supervision of their mentors, the teachers are free to work within the two other levels, establishing themselves the time devoted to participant observation and self observation. They also decide when to move from the second level to the third. When the teachers feel that they have gained enough experience they can also combine the two types of observations.

Teachers' activities that belong to any observation practice usually consist of two main parts: pilot observations and observations proper. Pilot observations run according to the scheme worked out for the whole procedure, with the intention of finding its faults and correcting them. Here, pilot observations are also devoted to

the development of observation skills specific for teacher creativity development and this is the reason why they are considered an obligatory element in the whole project. The skills characteristic for participant observations and self-observations will be presented and described in the following subchapters.

The creativity development model presented here is also teacher-friendly because of the fact that the teachers themselves will be expected to choose the moment when they feel they are ready to finish one activity and begin another. In other words, they will have to estimate the level of their observation skills, acquired during pilot observations. They will also decide about the number of the latter, remembering that these skills must be honed before they start the observations proper.

This model provides the teachers with the greatest possible freedom. In this way optimal conditions for the development of their individual creativity are established

#### 4. Participant observations

In the course of participant observation no “foreign bodies” are present in the classroom. The teachers observe and register the behaviours and reactions of their learners, looking for the procedures that they might call optimal. Based on the knowledge of their own teaching (see point 3.1.), the teachers must first choose the event or events that they want to concentrate on and carefully prepare the scheme of their own activities, also trying to predict the learners’ [needs]. The observation sheet suggested for this type of the observation could be arranged in the following form (Table 2):

**Table 2.** Level two. Scheme for an observation sheet

Course of the lesson	Event description	Suggested changes	Verification

The first and most important observation skill that must be developed here is the observer’s ability to fill the first two columns of their sheet which constitute the presentation of the lesson itself and the most detailed and precise description of the observed event. The third column is devoted to *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-for-action* (cf. GABRYŚ-BARKER 2009: 420), i.e., the presentation of new ideas that occurred to the observer. These ideas could be verified in later teaching practice and commented upon in column four. Teachers’ creative reflections may be completed later, but the event that formed the grounds for their development must be described immediately, so that no detail of student behaviour is forgotten by the observer. The events that are selected for participant observation must therefore be skillfully described by the latter during the lessons designed for pilot observations. Besides, it is to be emphasized that event descriptions are not equal



to reflection-in-action. At the beginning these descriptions may be difficult to complete for inexperienced teachers; therefore the whole process needs a lot of earlier practice (cf. DAY 2004: 53). The teachers will have to develop the ability to organize their lessons in such a way that the events they had selected for their participant observations receive the necessary attention, are described in details, and, at the same time the lessons will not lose their natural character. Event descriptions will certainly be coherent and cohesive when their authors have developed the skill of precise note taking. This ability remains crucial for the whole procedure and it has to be acquired by participant observers during pilot observations (cf. RICHARDS 2003: 119—144).

Since the observers' attention is in this case concentrated on students, their work devoted to preparatory procedures may be facilitated by the answers to the initial questions determining teacher-student relations, examples of which are as follows:

- What is the teachers' knowledge about how students learn?
- How do teachers organize students' work in the classroom?
- How far is the record of classroom events different from the teachers' plans and expectations?
- What is the characteristic tempo of the average lesson (rather slow — the students may be bored; rather quick — the students may not follow the teacher)?
- What is the teachers' attitude to capable and poor learners?
- What is the teachers' knowledge about student needs and expectations?
- What are the teachers' characteristic reactions to student errors?
- What is the type of homework considered best for particular types of lessons?
- What are the ways of checking it?
- What are the teachers' feelings and opinions about the relations with the students that they have established?

The teachers' background knowledge concerning their individual styles, the information about the learners as well as an adequate number of pilot observations will certainly form the grounds on which the strategies of participant observations optimal for the creativity development model described here could be established by particular teachers.

## 5. Self-observations

Self-observations belong to the third, most advanced stage of teachers' professional development, where creative behaviour is the crucial factor determining its nature. Unlike the participant observations, in which the reactions of the students are most important, here, particular individuals are expected to observe themselves as teachers. They have to realize that they shape the quality of the teaching-learning process in which they participate. In the course of these observations they are expected to



register and analyze the teaching procedures that they had designed earlier and put to practice. This implies the specific observation skill that the self-observers have had to acquire. The shift of teachers' attention from students to themselves is the greatest problem that they have to cope with.<sup>3</sup> Self-observations also require a different observation sheet, the basic pattern of which is as follows (Table 3):

**Table 3.** Level three. Scheme of an observation sheet

Plans	Implementations	Teachers' comments	Modification

The first column is devoted to the description of teaching procedures designed for the event selected to remain at the centre of the observer's attention and could be filled in prior to the lesson. Also lesson modifications (column four) introduced by the teachers on the basis of creative analyses of their former teaching may be registered, described and verified later. Columns two and three are most important for the observer. The events that underwent self-observation must be described (column 2) and supplied detailed comments (column 3) during the lesson or immediately afterwards. These comments are of the utmost importance here, since they include evaluations of teaching procedures that the teachers had applied, i.e., opinions about their successes and/or failures, as well as the description of the aspects of their teaching that, they decided, require creative changes.

It follows that pilot observations will then have to be devoted to teachers' learning to express in the form of precisely made notes what they think about their own teaching. In addition, their observation sheets, including first of all the observations proper, might then form the specific teaching portfolios (cf. RICHARDS and FARRELL 2005: 103—108) that will certainly contribute to further creative thinking as well as to the development of particular teaching styles.

## 6. Final remarks

Language teachers who decide to work on their professional creativity must realize, however, that the key to their ultimate success depends on their earlier conscious preparation of particular activities and equally conscious application of any innovations that they decide to introduce later in the course of their teaching practice.

<sup>3</sup> This statement is formed on the basis of the author's experience gained during the two FL teaching methodology seminars. Their members, the extra-mural students, and at the same time teachers of English were performing self-observations. The ability of concentrating on teaching procedures that they had applied and expressing comments about them was most difficult and time consuming for them to develop. Several lessons had passed before they could get used to the fact that during self-observations they become the centre of the teaching-learning process and they are the most important persons for themselves.

This statement may be supported by the opinions of other authors, e.g. GABRYŚ-BARKER (2007: 430), who points out that

the key concepts in [teacher] education these days are: awareness of one-self, self-direction and autonomy and at the affective level enthusiasm and creativity deriving from awareness.

KOMOROWSKA (2008: 73) also presents the fields of conscious knowledge needed by particular individuals, regarding possession of this knowledge as a preliminary condition for them to function as reflective FL teachers. The list of consciously performed activities which are peculiarly valid for the present model of teacher creativity development will be presented below.

### 6.1. Level 1

- conscious selection of lessons, or their fragments, that will be the object of diary writing,
- decisions concerning the data about the lessons in question (column 1, Table 1),
- ways of describing teaching procedures (column 2, Table 1),
- optimal moments and situations to make notes,
- optimal situations to verify suggested changes and improvements.

### 6.2. Level 2

- collecting the necessary information about one's own teaching,
- selection of events that will undergo participant observations,
- constructing the observation sheet and establishing its best shape,
- establishing the quality of data that constitute the course of the lesson in question as well as the observed event (columns 1, 2, Table 2),
- working out the ways of filling the observation sheet,
- deciding about optimal situations to verify the suggested changes,
- deciding about the quantity of pilot observations.

### 6.3. Level 3

- careful establishment of teachers' plans for the whole lesson and the observed event,
- the establishment of details of the behaviour which will undergo self-observation,

- working out the shape of the observation sheet,
- working out the ways of filling the observation sheet with special attention paid to teachers' comments,
- deciding about the optimal time and situation to verify the suggested changes and modifications of teachers' behaviour.

The character of the activities listed above depicts the nature of the language teachers' creativity model presented here. It shows the gradual development of teachers' creative thinking from diary writing through participant observations to self-observations, thus contributing to the conscious process of their becoming reflective practitioners (cf. STAŃCZYK 2009). This model could also be called a specific action research since it stimulates different types of improvements that the language teachers could introduce into teaching procedures of all kinds.

Another advantage of this model is its flexibility. Pre-service teachers, that is, students can work first of all on their diaries, discussed in point 2 (level 1). Student practice seems to be the most appropriate period when the teachers' attitudes to the nature of their future profession are shaped. Novice teachers can devote most of their time and attention to participant observations during which their creativity modifying the reactions of their students could be developed (level 2). Finally, self observations (level 3) can become the object of interest of the most experienced individuals. Particular teachers can go through all the stages of the creativity development model, deciding about their length, or select the level that they consider crucial for their practice.

Professional creativity is one of the most important aspects of teacher behaviour and work. It is assumed that the model described here will be accepted and treated as teacher-friendly and will help particular persons to successfully organize their work so that they can find and describe the fields of their creativity relevant to their teaching. They will also become capable of noticing the situations in which their creative behaviour needs further development.

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